

Message Text

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FOR ASST SECRETARY ROGERS FROM AMBASSADOR

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR

SUBJECT: PERCEPTIONS OF THE U.S.

REF: STATE 010605

1. THE U.S. ROLE IN PANAMA IS UNIQUE. WE WERE, AFTER ALL, THE MIDWIFE IF NOT THE FATHER OF NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE. WE BUILT THE INTEROCEANIC WATERWAY THAT HAS DOMINATED ECONOMIC LIFE AND POLITICAL LIFE HERE FOR THE PAST SEVENTY-THREE YEARS. WE HAVE RULE EXCLUSIVELY IN A STRIP OF TERRITORY THROUGH THE VERY HEART OF THIS SMALL COUNTRY. AND OUR PRODUCTS--FROM CARS TO COKES-- HAVE BECOME ESSENTIALS IN THE PANAMANIAN QUOTE WAY OF LIFE UNQUOTE. BUT THE WORLD HAS BEEN CHANGING RAPIDLY, AND WITH IT PANAMA. SO, TOO, HAVE LOCAL PERCEPTIONS OF BOTH SELF AND OF US. PANAMA'S DRIVE TO ASSERT SOVEREIGNTY OVER THE CANAL ZONE AND EVENTUALLY TO ACQUIRE CONTROL OF THE WATERWAY ITSELF IS THE KEY SYMBOL OF THIS CHANGE. BUT THE ALTERATIONS ARE BOTH BROADER AND DEEPER THAN MERELY WANTING TO GAIN CONTROL OVER A WATERWAY. FOR PANAMA SHARES MANY OF THE CHANGING PERCEPTIONS SO EVIDENT IN THE REST OF THIS HEMISPHERE AND IN THE ENTIRE DEVELOPING WORLD. IT IS JUST THAT THE CANAL OFFERS ONE OF THE MORE VISIBLE AND DRAMATIC

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EVIDENCES OF THE MORE GENERAL PHENOMENON.

2. THE FOLLOWING RESPONSES ARE KEYED TO THE QUESTIONS IN
LETTERED PARAGRAPHS IN THE REFTEL:

A. THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT THE EVENTS MENTIONED--VIETNAM, WATERGATE, ETC.--HAVE CAUSED MANY PANAMANIAN TO REGARD THE U.S. AS NOW LESS POWERFUL, LESS DETERMINED, LESS DOMINANT ON THE WORLD SCENE THAN IT WAS 10 OR 20 YEARS AGO. AND OF COURSE THEY ARE RIGHT. IN OUR FRIENDS, THIS HAS CAUSED PROFOUND SADNESS; IN OUR FOES, EQUALLY PROFOUND SATISFACTION. BUT BOTH, I THINK, SEE IT MORE AS DISARRAY AND FLOUNDERING IN OUR DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL LIFE THAN AS A FUNDAMENTAL WEAKENING OF THE ESSENTIALS OF POWER. PANAMANIAN MAY TALK GLEEFULLY OF OUR PRECIPITATE WITHDRAWAL FROM VIETNAM. BUT THEY ALSO SEE THE MILITARY POWER DEPLOYED IN THE HEART OF THEIR COUNTRY AND FEW HAVE ANY ILLUSIONS ABOUT THEIR ABILITY TO CAUSE A SIMILAR RETREAT HERE. HOWEVER, IT IS DOUBTLESS TRUE THAT FAR MORE PANAMANIAN TODAY THAN EVER BEFORE QUESTION THE WILLINGNESS OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE TO CARRY OUT A PROLONGED CONFRONTATION IF FACED WITH STEADY HARASSMENT, OPEN ANTAGONISM, AND PERSISTENT CONDEMNATION IN THE ARENAS OF WORLD OPINION.

B. VIETNAM WAS A REMOTE EVENT FOR PANAMA AND I DARE SAY MOST PANAMANIAN LOOK ON THAT EXPERIENCE MORE AS EVIDENCE OF OUR FAILURE TO RECOGNIZE OUR TRUE NATIONAL INTERESTS AND COPE WITH THEM IN PROPORTION THAN OF A FAILURE TO LIVE UP TO COMMITMENTS. MORE IMPRESSIVE TO PANAMA THAN VIETNAM IS THE RECORD OF THE U.S. IN ABIDING BY THE TERMS OF THE 1903 TREATY HERE. AND TO THEM, THE RECORD IS ONE OF REGULARLY AND DELIBERATELY MISINTERPRETING THE TREATY TO OUR OWN ADVANTAGE AND AGAINST PANAMA'S INTERESTS.

C. THE RIVALRY BETWEEN THE ADMINISTRATION AND CONGRESS IS SEEN HERE AS PART OF THE MORE GENERAL DISARRAY IN U.S. POLITICAL LIFE THAT MANY OUTSIDERS HAVE WATCHED WITH AMAZEMENT, CONFUSION OR SATISFACTION. WHAT DISTRESSES PANAMANIAN ABOUT THIS DEVELOPMENT IS THAT THEY BELIEVE IT REPRESENTS A GRAVE THREAT TO THE REALIZATION OF THEIR PRINCIPAL HOPE--A NEW TREATY AND A NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH THE U.S. EVEN THOUGH THEY FEEL THEIR RIGHTS ARE BEING SACRIFICED ON THE ALTAR OF THE AMERICAN POLITICAL
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PROCESS, THEY HAVE DECIDED TO BE PATIENT--BUT ONLY FOR A TIME.

D. IT IS NOT CLEAR THAT MOST AMERICANS UNDERSTAND OUR POLITICAL PROCESS. HOW MUCH HARDER, THEN, FOR A QUITE DIFFERENT PEOPLE, WITH A DIFFERENT HISTORY, AND LIVING WITH TOTALLY DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONS TO UNDERSTAND. WHAT THEY DO PERCEIVE IS THAT IN DEALING WITH THE U.S., THEY ARE ASKED TO BE TOLERANT AND PATIENT BUT THEY HAVE NO SENSE OF OUR UNDERSTANDING THEIR POLITICAL

PROBLEMS AND IMPERATIVES. ON THE EVIDENCE--HICKENLOOPER AND VONZALEZ AMENDMENTS, EXCLUSION OF OPEC NATIONS FROM THE TRADE ACT, CONGRESSIONALLY IMPOSED LIMITATIONS ON MILITARY SALES AND ON BILATERAL RELATIONS FROM CHILE TO ANGOLA--THEY WONDER IF CONGRESS IS NOT TAKING OVER THE CONDUCT OF FOREIGN POLICY. CONFIDENCE IN THE WILL AND THE ABILITY OF THE U.S. EXECUTIVE TO TAKE A STRONG STAND AND DO WHAT IT SAYS HAS CERTAINLY DIMINISHED. WHAT TRULY FRIGHTENS THEM IS THAT ANY NEW CANAL TREATY WILL FALL VICTIM TO THIS PROCESS.

E. THE TRADITIONAL ATTITUDE HERE HAS BEEN MIXED--LOVE/HATE, RESPECT/RESENTMENT, CALL IT WHAT YOU WILL. THAT HAS NOT CHANGED. WHAT HAS CHANGED IS THE MIX, WITH THE RESENTMENT FACTOR INCREASING. MORE IMPORTANT, IS THE GENERAL SETTING IN WHICH U.S.-PANAMA RELATIONS ARE SEEN. LIKE MANY OTHER COUNTRIES, PANAMA IS LOOKING TO PROTECT HER INTERESTS IN THE LARGER WORLD--TO REDUCE HER DEPENDENCE ON THE U.S., OPEN COMMERCIAL AND POLITICAL LINKS TO OTHER COUNTRIES, INCLUDING THE COMMUNIST STATES, STRENGTHEN TIES WITH THE DEVELOPING, NON-ALIGNED WORLD. IN PART, THIS IS AN ASPECT OF THE GROWING AWARENESS OF INTER-DEPENDENCE IN THE WORLD AT LARGE. IN ANOTHER PART, IT IS A CALCULATED MOVE ON PANAMA'S PART TO WIN BACKING FOR ITS POSITION IN THE WORLD ARENA VIS A VIS THE U.S.

F. CUBA'S INVOLVEMENT IN ANGOLA IS WORRISOME TO MANY PANAMANIAN. IT HAS DEMONSTRATED THAT CUBA'S ABILITY TO INTERVENE--EVEN IN FAR-AWAY AFRICA--HAS INCREASED GREATLY SINCE EARLIER, ABORTIVE EFFORTS IN VENEZUELA, PANAMA AND ELSEWHERE. THE INABILITY OF THE U.S. TO TAKE EFFECTIVE STEPS TO OPPOSE THE INTERVENTION WAS ALSO NOTED. HOWEVER, THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT IN MOST PANAMANIAN MINDS THAT THE U.S. WOULD INDEED RESIST CUBAN INTERVENTION HERE OR ELSEWHERE IN CENTRAL AMERICA. I THINK WE CAN EXPECT THE PANAMANIAN TO CAST INCREASINGLY WATCHFUL EYES ON CUBAN
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ACTIVITIES HERE.

G. IN GENERAL, THE TORRIJOS GOVERNMENT THINKS THAT THE U.S. PAYS MORE ATTENTION TO THOSE MAKE LOTS OF NOISE AND ATTACK US THAN TO THOSE WHO DOBILY DO OUR BIDDING. THE SPEECHES AND VOTES IN THE OAS AND UN ARE PART OF THIS GENERAL APPROACH AS WELL AS PART OF THE CAMPAIGN TO WIN BROAD WORLD SUPPORT FOR PANAMA'S CAUSE. SIMILARLY, PANAMA'S JOINING, INDEED LEADING IN THE FORMATION OF, SELA IS PART OF THE PROGRAM TO BROADEN CONTACTS AND LESSEN U.S. INFLUENCE. BUT AT THE BOTTOM LINE IS THE PANAMANIAN REALIZATION THAT THE OAS, THE UN, THE NON-ALIGNED WORLD CANNOT GIVE PANAMA A NEW CANAL TREATY. ONLY THE ADMINISTRATION AND THE CONGRESS CAN DO THAT. THUS, PANAMANIAN POLICY IS A BLENDING OF THE BILATERAL WITH THE MULTILATERAL. BUT ALL POLICIES ARE SUCH A BLEND.

H. THE HEART OF THE MATTER IS NOT CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF THE U.S. BUT RATHER CHANGING SELF-PERCEPTIONS. PANAMA CAN BE EXPECTED INCREASINGLY TO IDENTIFY ITSELF WITH OTHER SMALL, YOUNG AND ECONOMICALLY WEAK NATIONS AND TO EXPAND THE RANGE OF ITS CONTACTS AND TIES, POLITICAL AND COMMERCIAL.

I. PANAMA IS NOT TURNING TO ANY ONE OTHER NATIONS TO REPLACE THE U.S. THERE IS NONE THAT COULD PLAY THE SO-PERVASIVE ROLE. WHAT IT IS DOING IS SEEKING (AS NOTED ABOVE) TO BROADEN ITS LINKS WITH OTHERS AND TO BALANCE U.S. INFLUENCE AND POWER WITH THOSE OTHER CONTACTS.

J. FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF PANAMA, AND OF MOST OF THE DEVELOPING WORLD, THE U.S. AND THE OTHER INDUSTRIALIZED COUNTRIES ARE NOT REPEAT NOT MEETING THEIR NEEDS. THEY PERCEIVE A LESSENING U.S. INTEREST IN DOING SO AS THE PERCENTAGE OF U.S. NATIONAL PRODUCT DEVOTED TO SUCH PURPOSES DIMINISHES. THEY WILL TRY TO GET AS MUCH HELP AS THEY CAN FROM US. BUT THEY LOOK WITH GREATER HOPE TO THE INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND TO PRIVATE SOURCES, AS INDEED THEY SHOULD.

JORDEN

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